GOD IS A HUMANIST
Micah 6:6-8, Romans 13:8-10
Philippians 4:8-9
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A television sequence I shall never forget came in the middle of the series on The Holocaust. The S.S. Officer, deeply involved in the administration of the extermination camps was home for Christmas Eve, enjoying the spirit of the holiday, singing Christmas carols with his family. The fundamental Christian heresy, it has been proposed, is the suggestion that God doesn't care much about the human race: that it is not only appropriate but proper to keep one's relationship with the Almighty separate from one's relationship with other members of the human race.

It's the old Greek idea, of course: the suspicion that the tangible, created order, including human beings, is tainted, evil, tempting, sinful, and that the function of religion is to remove one from all of that. Thus there has always been a fatal tendency, inherent in Christianity to love God in the safe abstraction of piety, and cheerfully ignore the rest of the human race.

Listen, therefore to several scripture readings which suggest that humanity is God's major concern...that human welfare is His priority, not theological orthodoxy - Let us listen for God's word to us -

> What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? No the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God. (Micah 6:6-8).

> Be under obligation to no one - the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else; all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." If you love someone, you will never do him wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law. (Romans 13:8-10).

The final reading is from St. Paul's letter to the Christian Church in Philippi, written from prison, around the year 50 A.D. No one ever accused Paul of being a secular humanist, but these several verses reveal a point of view which is highly suggestive.

> In conclusion, my brothers, fill your minds with those things that are good and that deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable. Put into practice what you learned and received from me, both from my words and from my actions. And the God who gives us peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9).

What the scholars think is behind this extraordinary little paragraph is a question regarding the appropriate relationship between Christians and their Philippian neighbors. Philippi was a thoroughly Roman city. In that environment, under the stress of minority status, ridicule, discrimination and eventually persecution, the young Christian churches tended to take a very dim view of the pagan culture all around them. They weren't paranoid. They were authentically persecuted. As a result an understandable, but arrogant provincialism was emerging in their midst, a siege mentality. Anything Greek or Roman was wrong. To be a follower of Jesus was to cut oneself off from the customs, entertainments, arts, foods, even the values of that Greaco/Roman culture.

At the end of his letter to them Paul incorporated this unusual admonition: "Fill your minds with those things that are good." And then he used a series of words, most of which appear nowhere else in the Bible: true, noble, right, pure, lovely, honorable, and excellent. Those are not Judeo-Christian terms. The words, and the virtues they represent, are quoted directly from Greek Moral Philosophy. They were lifted verbatim from the religion of Rome and the ethical values the culture embraced. Paul, that is to say, is calling those Christian people away from their understandable isolation to a posture within the human race. Their calling was not to withdraw from the world: physically or intellectually. Their task, rather, was the far more difficult one of being disciples while living thoroughly in the world. "These human values," he is saying, "are important regardless of your theological orthodoxy. These are basic human values: they are God's will too. Make common cause with them and those who advocate them. George Bernard Shaw, in a letter to Leo Tolstoi asked, "Suppose the world were only one of God's jokes, would you work any less to make it a good one...?"

There is a strong motif of humanity and humanism in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is there from the Old Testament beginning. But it is fragile and keeps slipping away when Christian people begin to feel uncomfortable with the particular environment in which they are living. That is what was happening in Philippi. Union Seminary Professor Roger Shinn, in an article on the current religious situation, observes: "In times of insecurity, the shaking of old certainties and unanswerable questions, people yearn for simple answers, for visible enemies, for assurances that they are right." (A.D., 8/81).

We seem to be fully in the midst of such a time. The most dramatically muscular variety of religion today fits that description to a "T". Simple answers, visible enemies, assurance of rightness. David Read comments: "The possibility of a live religion that is intelligent, human, consistent with a full participation in contemporary culture, and yet basically orthodox, is dismissed out of hand." (The Faith Is Still There, p.57).

Instead, we are witnessing the emergence of reactionary religion from far-right obscurity to a position of unprecedented influence and power. The Moral Majority is a very large and very powerful organization. It represents a way of thinking that corresponds with Roger Shinn's analysis. It is absolutely certain of the truth and rightness of its agenda for the nation, its answers are simple, evoking nostalgia for the past and ignoring contemporary realities and it knows who the visible enemy is. The culprit is something called "Humanism"..."secular humanism". That is one of the problems I have with the Moral Majority - their overuse and misuse of the term humanism. Students know humanism as a school of philosophy characterized by atheism and concentration instead on humanity.

In fact, there is an organization of Humanists. It began with a Humanist Manifesto in 1933 and experienced a little attention when a second Humanist Manifesto was drafted and signed in 1973. That document, signed by a group of distinguished scholars, writers, scientists, said things like "No diety will save us: we must save ourselves." That is a secular statement with which we disagree. In fact, given humanity's track record, it is a silly statement. The humanists also said, "We believe that traditional, dogmatic, or authoritarian religions that place revelation of God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species." I do not disagree with that. It's exactly what Micah said several thousand years ago. But it makes the Moral Majority very nervous - and it provides an easy target, and a vague enemy which can be described as a conspiracy.

Classical Humanism is an idea born at the time of the Rennaisance with the recovery of the art and literature of Greece and Rome. The attention of the human race shifted to humanity at the end of the Middle Ages. Art historians point out that the Rennaisance allowed human body and nature to become subjects of art once again, instead of religious topics only. The Rennaisance released a wave of creative energy in the arts and letters that had been pent up for a thousand years. Luther and Calvin were humanists, by 16th century standards. Newsweek defined Humanism in a special essay as follows: "In Western tradition, humanism is an attitude that recognizes the dignity of man and the importance of culture to his full development. It emphasizes, as T.S.Eliot put it, the superiority of breadth, tolerance, and sanity, over narrowness, bigotry and fanaticism." (Op.city. p.48).

What Mr. Falwell means when he says "Secular humanism has become the religion of America" is that there are people who don't agree with his particular political agenda, or his vision for America. A secular humanist, according to Mr. Falwell, is one who advocates one or more of the following: ERA, Freedom of Choice for Abortion, Arms Limitation, Gun Control, Federal Responsibility in Voting Rights, Nutrition, Education and Environment.

Tim LaHaye, head of a Radio Network and who has Bunker Hunt money to spend, declares that "America is controlled by 375,000 humanists." In a book he wrote on the humanist conspiracy LaHaye criticizes Thomas Acquinas for using pagan Aristotelian logic as his theological base, and Michaelangelo for sculpting a nude David. LaHaye comments: "Rennaisance obsession with nude 'art forms' was the forerunner of the modern humanists demand for pornograph in the name of freedom." (p.50).

The battleground today, more often than not, is the School Board meeting, or the Library Governing Committee. Advocates of the Moral Majority position have succeeded in intimidating public officials so that several states now include the Genesis I account of Creation as science in school curriculum, and in many schools and public libraries, have managed to remove from the shelves literature which they find offensive such as J.D.Salinger's Catcher in the Rye, and works by John Steinbeck, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley.

Only recently have prominent educators, politicians and church leaders understood what is happening and begun to respond. Barry Goldwater, not exactly a flaming liberal, with typical candor, had a bit to say about the religious right's tactics during Justice O'Connor's Senate confirmation hearings. And Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti welcomed this year's Freshmen with an address which accused the Moral Majority in no uncertain terms of assaulting the dearest values of Western civilization, freedom of inquiry and expression.

I happen to believe that one can start with the Bible and end up supporting all the causes Mr. Falwell finds distasteful. I happen to believe that one can start with scripture and end up with a very different set of political goals. I do not believe God is a Republican, or a Democrat. I do not believe He favors supply side economics or the ideas of John Maynard Keynes. I do not believe we are well served by the absolutism which claims absolute right, divine inspiration in support of or in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. In fact, I believe the Judeo Christian tradition is a value system in which people of differing political positions can debate with one another in pursuit of a truth much bigger than either of them. The victim in the overheated atmosohere today is the humanism and humanity and respect for others which is part of the tradition from the very beginning. God doesn't dictate the way the poor are to be cared for. But He most certainly has said that a nation better do it; and that He is most intensely concerned about

justice, fairness compassion.

It is simply impossible to read much of the Old Testament without realizing that the God described on its pages is profoundly interested in the human situation. You simply can't read very far without sensing that this God is interested in human hysiene, diet, and health, that beauty in nature is His creation, and human beauty as well. "O lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth." From beginning to end the God of the Old Testament cares about how people are getting along: politically, economically, sexually. Nothing human escapes His attention: the weights on the scales in the market place, the price of grain, the rules for the sale of cattle. The God of Old Testament is deeply and profoundly involved in the human situation.

The humanism of Jesus is evident in the Gospels. He cared about people in their wholeness. He cared about their physical distress, their hunger, their fevers and labor pains. He dealt with bodies, not just spirits. He wept and laughed and loved and drank wine and lived a human life. The humanism of our religion is its priceless legacy. It has been the creative energy behind our best efforts: Bach, DaVince, Dante, Milton, Michaelangelo, Bernstein, Picasso, Casals. It has borne the human values which are the glory of our civilization: freedom, tolerance, civility, duty, integrity. Those values are gifts of God to be applauded and preserved and celebrated wherever they exist.

You don't have to water down Christian orthodoxy to embrace humanism. The salvation Christianity proclaims is not an escape from the human situation, but a way of living humanly.Salvation has to do with eternity, but, it also has to do with living more, loving more, caring more, hurting more, being more human now. To be saved is not to turn away from one's own humanity, but to accept it, to rejoice in it...to affirm one's place in the created, human order. The humanism of God is its very bedrock. Hans Kung said it memorably:"The human face of God." We will remember 3 months from now, but our faith starts with the word becoming human. Incarnation begins, not in a splendid, ornate temple ritual, but in that most human phenomena...conception, gestation, labor, birth. Jesus Christ - God incarnate, was a little child once, and had parents and brothers and sisters and friends and played games and ran races and skinned his knees and even had passionate, unreasonable, little boy arguments with his chums. Jesus of Nazareth was human, and loved people and wedding parties and quiet walks beside the sea and chaotic, pushing crowds on hot summer afternoons and hard work and good bread shared at night with special colleagues. The redemptive event for us, is not a sterile transaction of the spirit, but a public execution on the city garbage dump. Resurrection is not a private vision of eternity, but the encounter on the road at the end of the day with a strong and capable friend.

"The salvation brought by Christ" David H.S. Read writes, "means much more than an escape from hell...and a promise of heaven. It has to do with the discovery here on this earth of all that reflects the goodness, truth and beauty of the God who made us." (Op.cit. p.69). Of course, we do not agree with the secular humanism that sees no transcendence, no truth but human reason, no morality beyond expediency. Of course we do not agree with the pessimism and cynicism which result when your God is dead. Of course we deplore the degradation of humanity in pornography, and the materialism which turns children of God in worshippers of the Golden Calf. Equally demeaning, however, is the suggestion that we were created for

anything other than this like life together, on the earth, human life. It is not a footnote to the Gospel.

The best of all news is that God is a humanist: that He cares about us and that nothing about us or our situation is outside His concern and love and mercy. It's important to remember that. His will is more humanity, not less. He intends for us to love our humanness: to delight in our humanity; to celebrate the beauty and love and kindness we are capable of producing, to rejoice in the image He has created in us. What a shame to miss that - that humanism of God!

Amen.

Dear God, we are grateful for our humanness. The years teach us the value of life, the importance of love and kindness. For that we give you thanks. And for Your son, our Lord, who showed us how to live in love with one another and in peace with You, we are grateful. For truth and beauty - nobleness - honesty - duty - for all Your gifts we give thanks. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.